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ABSTRACT

Extensive studies over a long period have shown that students have chosen to drop out of school for a variety of reasons. These studies range from a general look at student dropouts to those that focus on specific groups. This paper reports primarily on "At Risk of Dropping Out" data derived from the Texas Education Agency Reports. Selected agency tables from these reports are reproduced in the appendices. The Texas Education Agency data presented in appendices 2 through 9 give a clear indication of the role of the charter-school movement as one response to the "at risk/drop out" student. It does appear that charter schools do serve as a dropout intervention to some degree. An appendix listing "Open-Enrollment Charter Schools Fall 1998 Data Collection" is provided. (Contains 12 references and a 9-page appendix providing statistics from the Texas Education Agency.) (DFR)

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CHARTER SCHOOLS AS A RESPONSE?

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CHARTER SCHOOLS AS A RESPONSE TO STUDENT DROP OUT PHENOMENA IN THE REGULAR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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The student drop out phenomena is a long standing one. Students choose to drop out of school for a variety of reasons. Examples abound of the effort that has been spent studying and writing about school drop outs. Studies range from a general look at student drop outs, to studies that focus on specific groups of students.

A 1996 report[1] discussed the drop out rates among various age levels of students classified as Hispanics, as well as the changing ethnic demography in the United States. A follow-up on this report[2] looked at some economic factors and education level attained to show that Hispanics were less regardless of educational level attained than the "others"[3]. There were a number of recommendations made in this report including: corrective action at every point along the educational continuum; facilitate access and provide appropriate support to postsecondary education; build capacity in the educational professions; initiate appropriate testing and assessment and its usage; and target civil, financial, human and material resources toward hispanic americans in the federal work force[4].

Another report, in 1997, focused on Latino students (Fashola, et. al., 1997[5]). These authors concluded that, "On average, Latino students perform much worse in elementary and secondary school that Anglo (*sic*) students on measures of academic

achievement and other measures of academic success"[6]. They went on to state "Low socioeconomic (*sic*) status does not explain the educational difficulties of Latino students"[7].

The recommendations that emerge seem to strongly suggest some alternative to the regular public school model. The focus of the argument is that the regular public school structure is not working effectively for this population. There is a deferral from the use of the term "traditional school" in this paper, because the focus of studies and writings have been about what is the "regular public school", rather than some other way of schooling.

Those who have been in education for over 25 years are familiar with the 'alternative school movement' of the late 60's and early 70's. This movement was in response to the regular public schools not meeting the needs of some of the students. These schools ran under the 'umbrella' of a regular school, and many times the students in the alternative school were enrolled in a regular school as their site school. While this might have been done for funding purposes [funding from the state level] it was done as much to ensure credibility of the student's school effort to external agencies.

With the increased focus on the "at-risk" student and the drop-out student there was a renewed interest in recent years in "alternative schools". One of the outcomes of this interest were what are called "alternative schools" which run under the local

school districts as another school within the school district. The purpose of these schools are many, from serving students with discipline problems to attempting to meet the needs of students who might well drop out of school.

It needs be pointed out that much of the effort focused on "drop-outs" [students who drop out of school] and "at-risk" students [potential 'drop-outs'] has focused on students who are termed "low achieving". However, it must be noted that students who are extremely bright and who had demonstrated an excellent academic record also drop out. Clearly, then what results is the issue that there are students which the present public school configuration and operation does not function for. Unfortunately, this ill-fit of the regular public schools to students often gives rise to what might be called "poor politics". That is, politically motivated individuals [or groups in search of power] putting on the mantel of concern for [a selected group of] students who have either dropped out or who it is deemed might drop out. This paper will not address such ill political machinations, but will focus on attempts to build additional alternative school models.

The Charter School Model

The concern that the regular public school model was not serving all the students, and a consideration of some of the alternative schooling operations culminated in the Charter School Model. The Charter Schools are called charter

schools because they operate under a charter by the state educational agency of the particular state that they are in. Further, state funds are allocated to the charter schools by the appropriate sections of the various states funding models. Therefore, each of the states [of the United States] has its own laws, regulations, and policies, for the establishment, funding, and operations of charter schools within the state.

In a very real sense, these charter schools are the parallel organizations which one speaks about in organizational development as one way to bring about the necessary changes which the organizational lethargy, cronyism, and so forth in the existing organization prevent. These charter schools are seen as powerful forces for school reform by Finn, et. al.[8]

To say that charter schools are 'birthed' with high expectations would not be an understatement. Once in operation, the evaluation of the specific charter school becomes one of the issues to be addressed. The various states each have their criteria and evaluation methodologies. Similarly, teachers, parents, community, and students have their criteria. It might be somewhat meaningless to evaluate a charter school in its first year of operation. Certainly, a summative evaluation scheme appears to be inappropriate, as there are operational 'bugs' to be worked out, and the students have not been in the charter school process long enough to examine its effects. However, formative evaluation would be useful during all times of operations, just as it would

in the regular public school. A recent newspaper article presented mixed reviews of charter school evaluations with one year of operation. "...(P)arents and teachers generally expected more than their schools have been able to deliver" was one conclusion drawn by the study of "...the 31 charter schools that were open during 1998-99".[9] However, the study of these charter schools suggests that as time goes on, there will be more satisfaction as the schools will rise to meet expectations.

The issue of funding for the charter schools is double-sided. On the one hand there are the opponents who feel strongly that the charter school funding diminishes the funding for the regular public schools. On the other hand, in any time of fiscal exigency necessitating budget adjustment downward, what will become of the funding for the charter schools? Such fiscal unsurety can give rise to a feeling of instability of the charter schools.

A Brief Look at the Texas Charter Schools

The following brief discussion is primarily derived from the Texas Education Agency Reports.[10] Selected Texas Education Agency tables from these various reports have been reproduced in the appendix to this paper, for the reader to peruse and interpret. For the focus of this paper, the "At Risk of Dropping Out" data on appendix page 1 shows a greater percentage of students enrolled in Charter Schools

in this category (61.2% in Charter Schools as contrasted with 37% in the State of Texas overall.

According to the data (appendix page 1), 52% of the teachers in the Charter Schools are not certified. However, 2.9% of the teachers have doctorate degrees, with another 19.2% holding Masters degrees. So, while less than 50% are certified teachers over 22% have Masters or higher degrees.

The Texas Education Agency data presented on appendix pages 2 through 9 on the Charter Schools is presented by "At-Risk Charter Schools" and "Non-at-Risk Charter Schools". This gives a clear indication of the role of the charter school movement as one response to the 'at-risk/drop-out' student. It is interesting to note that the teachers in the Charter Schools average salary is less than the average salary of Texas public school teachers (page 3, appendix).

Class size is considered by many as a critical criterion for learning is the number of students per teacher, and this ratio is higher for charter schools than the regular public schools. If this is a critical criterion, the 'at-risk' charter school is in a deficit mode, for the student/teacher ratio is 24.9, as opposed to the public school ratio of 15.3.

Appendix page 4 of this paper presents the Texas Education Agency table for the reasons for founding a charter school. In considering the responses in this table,

there does not appear to be a great difference between the overall summarized importance for the various reasons, the at-risk charter schools, and the non-at-risk charter schools. In other words, the assigned importance for the varied reasons for starting a charter school are more similar than different.

When it comes to the challenges faced in opening a charter school, as reported by the Texas Education Agency, and displayed in appendix page 5, the level of difficulty for the various 'challenges' again are more similar than different. If anything, it appears that the non-at-risk charter schools reported a higher level of difficulty on the various challenges. Once in operation, the challenges became "Challenges in Operation". The Texas Education Agency table of these reported challenges is found on appendix page 6. In considering these summarized results, again the non-at-risk charter school results are a higher level of difficulty over the various challenges.

Appendix pages 7 and 8 present Texas Education Agency tables that address satisfaction with the charter schools, by 'at-risk' and 'non-at-risk' and these responses are relative to the regular public school. In considering the results on appendix page 7, the effects of larger class size of the at-risk charter schools may to have some impact on the areas where these schools get a lower rating (i.e., such areas as personal attention, teachers care, interesting classes, etc.). The Texas Education Agency tables

presented on appendix page 8 are again reflective of the satisfaction with the schools. These 'satisfaction ratings' are both 'report-card grading' including comparing the charter school with their previous school(A-F), asking how satisfied they are, and whether they will return next year. There is also a Texas Education Agency table which is a several year reporting of satisfaction. Overall, it seems that the 'at-risk charter schools' receive a higher satisfaction rating.

Appendix page 9 contains Texas Education Agency tables that report the plans of the students after completing the charter school at-risk charter school vs. non-at-risk charter school, a several year 'at-risk charter school reporting of plans, and ethnic, gender, and age data on the at-risk schools over a several year span. While the non-at-risk charter school respondents report a higher percentage with '4 year collge plans (49.4% vs 25.8%) the key is the large percentage of 'at-risk charter school' students who will be continuing their education (over 58%).

Summary

Does the charter school serve as a drop-out intervention? From the Texas Education Agency tables presented in the appendix to this paper, pages 1 through 9 the reader can draw some conclusions. It appears from these tables the answer will be a qualified yes! Some may argue that it is a "Hawthorne Effect". However, based onm

some of the Charter School/Faculty characteristics presented in these tables, it might also be argued that these gains were gotten under some rather adverse conditions.

ENDNOTES

1.— Our Nation on the Fault Line: Hispanic American Education. Washington, D.C.: Initiative on Hispanic Education, 1996

2.— Update to the Report Our Nation on the Fault Line: Hispanic American Education. Washington, D.C.: Initiative on Hispanic Education, 1998

3. N.B. When people group themselves together, they tend to see the world as "us and them". In the instance here the "thems" are referred to as Anglos. The definition of the term "Anglo" is derived from "angle" which became "angles" for the people and they inhabited "Angland" what is now England. To call a person of French origin, or Irish origin or OTHER THAN ENGLISH origin is really a racial slur, at best. In this paper the term will simply be "others" and when authors works utilized in this paper are used, their use of the term "Anglo" will be changed to others; for that is what is meant. The Oxford English Dictionary 2nd edition

4.—Update to the Report ... pages 59-62, 64.

5.Fashola, O. S., R. E. Slavin, M. Calderón, R. Durán. Effective Programs for Latino Students in Elementary and Middle Schools. Hispanic Dropout Project, 1997.

6.ibid page 1

7.ibid page 2

8.Finn, C. jr., B. Manno, G. Vanourek. The Little Engine That Could. HOVER DIGEST. 2000, No.2 pp 8-11

9.—Philadelphia Inquirer. March 21, 2000. Page B1

10. —How Well Charter Schools Are Doing. Austin: Texas Education Agency

—Texas Open Enrollment Charter Schools: Third Year Evaluation, 1998-99. Austin: Texas Education Agency

—What Do The Charter Schools in Texas Look Like? Open Enrollment Charter Schools Fall 1998 Data Collection. Austin: Texas Education Agency

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APPENDIX

Open-Enrollment Charter Schools
Fall 1998 Data Collection

Student Information

CATEGORY	Charters	State of Texas*
Total Enrolled	11,520	3,828,975
Male	53.4%	51%
Female	46.6%	49%
African American	36.3%	14%
Hispanic	40.7%	37%
White	20.7%	46%
Other	2.3%	3%
"At Risk of Dropping Out"	61.2%	37%
Special Education	7.4%	12%
Gifted/Talented	3.4%	8%
Limited English Proficiency	7.3%	12%
Enrolling from Private or Home School	9.7%	NA
Not Enrolled in School Year Previous (Prekindergarten, K, or Recovered Dropout)	9.2%	NA

Adult Information

ETHNICITY (State data*)	Faculty	Administration	Board
Total	693 (247,651)	184	412
Male	36.0%	38.0%	54.0%
Female	64.0%	62.0%	46.0%
African American	26.6% (8%)	27.7%	21.8%
Hispanic	21.0%(15%)	20.1%	24.8%
White	49.8%(76%)	50.6%	51.7%
Other	2.6% (1%)	1.6%	1.7%

Faculty Credentials

Certified	48.0%
Non-Certified	52.0%
Masters	19.2% (Advanced degrees State: 27%)
Doctorate	2.9%

*All State data from Snapshot '97, 1996-1997 School District Profiles, TEA

SOURCE: Texas Education Agency

Overall Open-Enrollment Charter School Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity, 1998-99 (percentages)

Ethnicity	Texas Public Schools[8]	Texas Charter Schools	At-Risk Charter Schools	Non-at-Risk Charter Schools
Hispanic	38	42.5	50.2	34.4
African American	14	34.2	35.2	33.1
Anglo	45	21.5	13.8	29.6
Other	3	1.8		

Mean Differences between Texas School Enrollments and the Enrollments of the Traditional School Districts in which They Are Located (percentage point differences)[15]

School Type	Anglo	African American	Hispanic
All public schools	8.9	6.5	9.3
All charter schools	17.3	20.9	21.4
At-risk charter schools	15.2	18.0	19.6
Non-at-risk charter schools	19.4	24.4	23.3

Charter School Special Populations, 1998-99 (percentages)

Special Status	Texas Public Schools [17]	Texas Charter Schools	At-Risk Charter Schools	Non-at-Risk Charter Schools
At-risk students	na	66.2	97.5	33.2
Special education students	12.0	8.5	10.9	6.0
LEP students	12.0	3.4	4.3	2.6

SOURCE: Texas Education Agency

Teacher Characteristic	Texas Public Schools [18]	Texas Charter Schools	At-Risk Charter Schools	Non-at-Risk Charter Schools
Non-certified	3.9	53.9	62.3	47.5
African American	8.0	35.2	40.1	31.4
Hispanic	16.0	21.8	24.1	20.1
Anglo	75.0	46.5	39.5	51.5
Other	1.0	1.8	1.1	2.3

Teacher Characteristic	Texas Public Schools [19]	Texas Charter Schools	At-Risk Charter Schools	Non-at-Risk Charter Schools
Non-degreed	0.9	11.0	11.7	10.5
Baccalaureate degree	72.1	69.2	66.8	70.7
Advanced degree	26.0	25.3	26.3	24.3
Student/teacher ratio	15.3	21.4	24.9	17.8
Average experience in years	11.8	5.83	5.71	5.94
Average full-time salary	33,537	26,044	25,868	26,221
Total faculty count		815.5	349	468.5

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SOURCE: Texas Education Agency

Reasons for Founding Charter School	At-Risk Charter Schools	Non-at-Risk Charter Schools	All Charter Schools
Realize an educational vision	2.92	3.00	2.96
Serve a special student population	2.85	2.38	2.62
Involve parents	2.62	2.54	2.58
Gain autonomy in education planning	2.38	2.54	2.46
Gain autonomy to develop relation with community	2.38	2.08	2.24
Attract more students	2.35	1.92	2.14
Seek public funding	2.00	1.83	1.92
Gain autonomy from local school district	1.96	1.75	1.86
Gain autonomy fiscal management	2.00	1.71	1.86
Seek grants	2.00	1.54	1.78
Gain autonomy in personnel issues	1.69	1.63	1.66
Gain autonomy from state laws	1.50	1.58	1.54
* 1 = limited or no importance 2 = secondary importance 3 = primary importance			

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SOURCE: Texas Education Agency

Challenges Opening Charter Schools: At-Risk versus Non-at-Risk Schools (Mean Scores)*

Challenges Opening Charter School	At-Risk Charter Schools	Non-at-Risk Charter Schools	All Charter Schools
Lack of startup funds	2.54	2.67	2.60
Inadequate operating funds	2.19	2.42	2.30
Lack of planning	1.92	2.00	1.96
Inadequate facilities	1.54	2.00	1.76
Hiring teaching staff	1.85	1.65	1.74
TEA regulations	1.69	1.75	1.72
State Board of Education approval process	1.50	1.67	1.58
State/federal health/safety regulations	1.54	1.58	1.56
Federal education regulations	1.42	1.67	1.54
Local board opposition	1.23	1.21	1.22
Community opposition	1.15	1.04	1.10
Teacher association resistance	1.12	1.04	1.08
Internal conflicts	1.27	1.21	1.08

* 1 = not at all difficult 2 = difficult 3 = very difficult

SOURCE: Texas Education Agency

Comparison of Challenges from Year-One to Later Years for At-Risk and Non-at-Risk Schools (Mean Scores) *

Compare Challenges from Year One to Later Years	At-Risk Charter Schools	Non-at-Risk Charter Schools	All Charter Schools
Securing adequate funding	1.86	1.89	1.88
Realizing the original vision	1.50	2.11	1.87
Involving parents	1.83	1.56	1.67
Attracting and retaining teachers/staff	1.17	1.56	1.40
Attracting students	1.33	1.33	1.33

* 1 = easier to handle 2 = about the same 3 = more difficult

Challenges in Operation: At-Risk versus Non-at-Risk Charter Schools (Mean Scores)*

Challenges in Operation	At-Risk Charter Schools	Non-at-Risk Charter Schools	All Charter Schools
Inadequate operating funds	2.50	2.75	2.64
Repayment of state aid	2.40	2.63	2.54
TEA regulations	1.50	3.11	2.47
Inadequate facilities	2.17	2.44	2.33
Federal education regulations	1.50	2.89	2.33
Lack of planning time	2.00	2.33	2.20
Health/safety regulations	1.50	2.11	1.87
Hiring teaching staff	1.67	1.67	1.67
Internal conflicts	1.00	2.00	1.60
Teacher association resistance	1.17	1.86	1.54
Local board opposition	1.17	1.44	1.33
Community opposition	1.00	1.38	1.21
Other		3.00 (1 response)	3.00

* 1 = easier 2 = about the same 3 = difficult 4 = very difficult

SOURCE: Texas Education Agency

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Categories	Better	Same	Worse	Not Sure
Small class size				
Non-at-Risk Schools	59.6	24.2	10.5	5.7
At-Risk Schools	58.8	28.1	7.1	6.0
Good teachers				
Non-at-Risk Schools	49.8	35.3	9.3	5.6
At-Risk Schools	51.9	33.0	7.4	7.1
Personal attention from teachers				
Non-at-Risk Schools	53.0	32	6.5	7.8
At-Risk Schools	46.7	40.1	8.5	8.7
Teachers care about students				
Non-at-Risk Schools	53.0	33.4	7.5	6.1
At-Risk Schools	45.5	39.0	7.3	8.2
Interesting classes				
Non-at-Risk Schools	45.3	32.1	17.0	5.7
At-Risk Schools	39.9	41.1	11.8	7.3
Feeling safe				
Non-at-Risk Schools	46.5	41.5	8.9	3.1
At-Risk Schools	37.8	48.6	6.4	7.3
Principal cares about students				
Non-at-Risk Schools	41.9	30.7	17.3	10.1
At-Risk Schools	37.3	37.2	10.7	15.4
Feeling of belonging				
Non-at-Risk Schools	40.0	44.0	8.7	7.3
At-Risk Schools	39.5	44.9	5.0	8.7
Choice of classes				
Non-at-Risk Schools	35.8	29.4	28.8	6.1
At-Risk Schools	41.4	36.5	14.1	8.0
Order in classroom				
Non-at-Risk Schools	35.8	41.4	16.7	6.1
At-Risk Schools	38.5	44.3	9.7	7.5
Close to home				
Non-at-Risk Schools	31.2	28.7	35.3	4.6
At-Risk Schools	30.0	36.1	29.3	4.3

SOURCE: Texas Education Agency

Appendix page 7

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Grades	Non-at-Risk School Respondents		At-Risk School Respondents	
	Charter	Previous	Charter	Previous
A	24.3	21.0	25.6	12.6
B	32.6	28.4	31.9	21.7
C	19.3	20.1	15.0	23.8
D	9.9	11.2	8.1	16.0
F	9.4	12.7	8.7	13.4
Not sure	4.6	6.6	10.6	12.5

	Non-at-Risk School Respondents	At-Risk School Respondents
Satisfaction with Charter School		
Very satisfied	21.6	29.3
Satisfied	57.1	58.3
Not satisfied	21.1	12.4
Plans for Next Year		
I will graduate	15.4	37.3
Among those eligible to return		
I will return to charter school	58.3	51.2
I will switch schools	14.9	16.7
I don't know yet	26.8	32.1

	At-Risk Schools 1996-97	At-Risk Schools 1997-98	At-Risk Schools 1998-99
Satisfaction with Charter School			
Very satisfied	56.8	37.7	29.3
Satisfied	38.9	52.3	58.3
Not satisfied	4.3	9.9	12.4
Grades Assigned by Students*			
A	45.0	32.5	28.7
B	42.5	41.9	35.7
C	7.7	17.6	16.8
D	3.0	5.9	9.2
F	1.8	2.2	9.6
Plans for Next Year			
I will graduate	38.4	35.3	37.3
Among those eligible to return			
I will return to charter school	69.0	63.1	51.2
I will switch schools	8.4	7.7	16.7
I don't know yet	22.6	29.5	32.1

SOURCE: Texas Education Agency

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Plans	Non-at-Risk School Respondents	At-Risk School Respondents
Get a job	10.5	20.9
Go to technical school	7.4	10.6
Go to a community college	13.7	21.9
Go to a 4-year college	49.4	25.8
Join the military	6.9	8.4
Not sure	12.1	12.4

Plans	At-Risk Schools 1996-97	At-Risk Schools 1997-98	At-Risk Schools 1998-99
Get a job	19.6	16.0	20.9
Go to technical school	8.8	7.1	10.6
Go to a community college	22.8	20.3	21.9
Go to a 4-year college	32.7	32.2	25.8
Join the military	5.3	13.6	8.4
Not sure	10.7	9.4	12.4

Characteristics	At-Risk Schools 1996-97 N=448	At-Risk Schools 1997-98 N=465	At-Risk Schools 1998-99 N=771
Race			
Hispanic	76.0	68.3	50.7
African American	5.7	22.5	36.3
Anglo	6.4	5.5	6.3
Other/NA	11.9	3.5	6.7
Gender			
Female	51.3	47.9	48.8
Male	48.7	52.1	51.2
Age			
12 and under	5.0	6.6	3.4
18 and over	42.3	52.1	32.3

SOURCE: Texas Education Agency

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